

# CORNELIS CORNELISZ. VAN HAARLEM

(Haarlem 1562 - Haarlem 1638)

## *The Labours of Hercules*

oil on oak panel  
47.7 x 33.7 cm (18¾ x 13¼ in)

*'That three-bodied Geryon,  
three-headed Cerberus failed to unnerve me? And was it for this  
that my hands were able to break the horns of the Cretan bull,  
that I cleansed the Augean stables and shot the Stymphalian birds,  
that I caught the deer of Diana in Mount Parthenius' forests;  
stole Hippolyta's golden belt by the river Thermodon,  
and captured the apples so closely watched by the sleepless dragon?  
Was it for this that I conquered the centaurs, and overpowered  
the boar which was wasting Arcadia's fields? That even the Hydra  
gained nothing by growing two heads to replace each one she had lost?  
Remember too that, as soon as I saw Diomedes' horses  
fattened on human blood with their mangers cluttered with mangled  
corpses, I slaughtered them all and destroyed their master beside them.  
Mine are the hands which crushed the life from the lion of Nemea;'*

- Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book IX.184-197

**I**N ANCIENT GREEK MYTHOLOGY, HERCULES WAS THE son of Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene. As he was a product of her husband's infidelity, the goddess Hera tormented Hercules throughout his life and on one occasion drove him mad, causing him, according to Diodorus, to attack 'his own children by Megara...and strike them through with his darts, as if they had been his enemies'.<sup>1</sup> Having come to his senses, Hercules went to the Oracle of Delphi, in order to seek guidance on how to expiate his crime. Unbeknownst to him the Oracle was being guided by Hera, and so he was directed to serve his arch enemy King Eurystheus for ten years. Eurystheus set him ten labours (although the King would later add an additional two), and having completed these astonishingly difficult tasks he was purified of sin and granted immortality.

In *The Labours of Hercules*, Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem has depicted the great hero gesturing towards the heavens while standing amidst the bodies of several of the great creatures that he has slain or captured as part of his twelve labours. These bodies are those of the Nemean Lion, the Erymanthian



Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *Hercules and Achelöis*, 1590,  
Private Collection (Figure 1)

Boar, and the Lernaean Hydra. The Nemean Lion was a ferocious beast whose pelt was impenetrable. As a result Hercules strangled the lion and used its own claw to skin it. The boar he trapped by driving it into thick snow, where it floundered exhausted, allowing Hercules to capture and present it to Eurystheus alive. The hydra 'had a huge body, with nine heads, eight mortal, but the middle one immortal' and when one head was sliced off, two more would grow in its place.<sup>2</sup> In order to combat this, as soon as Hercules chopped off one of the Hydra's heads, his nephew Iolaus would instantly burn the stump. 'Having thus got the better of the sprouting heads, he chopped off the immortal head, and buried it'.<sup>3</sup> In the background, on the right-hand side, van Haarlem illustrates a further labour, the task of stealing the girdle of Hippolyta, the queen of the fearsome Amazons. In fact Hercules so intrigued Hippolyta that she willingly gave him the girdle as van Haarlem illustrates. On the left-hand side two other figures can be glimpsed among the trees. One appears to be a centaur, perhaps highlighting the mythological episode when Hercules was attacked by intoxicated centaurs, on his way to capture the boar.

<sup>1</sup> Diodorus, *The Historical Library of Diodorus the Sicilian*, vol. I, trans. G. Booth, (W. McDowell, 1814) p. 227.

<sup>2</sup> Apollodorus, *Gods and Heroes of the Greeks: The Library of Apollodorus*, 2.5.2, trans. Michael Simpson, (University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> Apollodorus, II.5.2.





Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *Two Followers of Cadmus Devoured by a Dragon*, 1588, The National Gallery, London (Figure 2)

Surrounded by the spoils of his monumental deeds, Hercules himself stands against a gloomy, forbidding landscape. His powerful nude body, seen from behind, entirely dominates the canvas. In his left hand he grasps his famous club, while gesturing dramatically skywards with his right, his muscle-bound body taut with emotion. Van Haarlem's focus is a study of the idealised male nude, epitomised by this demi-god. Hercules' physique is the focus of the work, the depiction of his labours deliberately secondary, despite their lively detail.

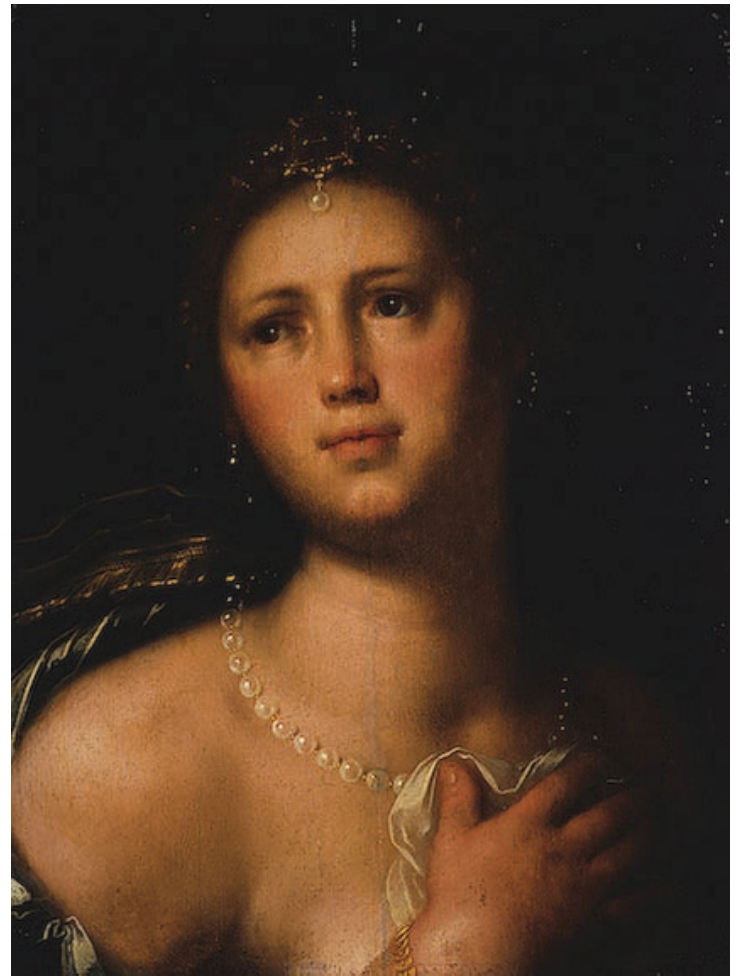
Van Haarlem depicted Hercules on several occasions, another example being *Hercules and Acheloüs*, which was sold by Christie's, New York in 2008 for \$8,105,000, and which now hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (fig. 1). In both works the central figures have been pushed to the very front of the picture plane so that Hercules' skilfully rendered musculature has the greatest impact. The scene in *Hercules and Acheloüs* is frenzied in comparison to the more concise drama of the present work but the paintings both share the focus of the hero's brute strength. In *Hercules and Acheloüs*, van Haarlem highlights the tensed arms and knee of Hercules, as he prepares to rip the horns from the massive bull's head, whereas in *The Labours of Hercules* the viewer can contemplate the male nude as a whole. As in the present work van Haarlem has painted an additional vignette in the background of *Hercules and Acheloüs*, which helps to contextualise the foreground scene. In both works,



Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *After the Deluge*, 1588, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 3)

the artist has imbued these images of man's power with a monumentality suggestive of Hercules' legendary strength.

The image of the male nude from behind, the focus of *The Labours of Hercules*, is a recurring motif throughout van Haarlem's work, another example being the National Gallery's *Two Followers of Cadmus Devoured by a Dragon* (fig. 2). Van Haarlem's great friend and contemporary, Hendrick Goltzius (1558-1617) made an etching of this powerful painting, and a copy can be found in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg. The terrifying dragon recalls the image of the serpent-like Hydra in the present work. This fantastical creature is contrasted with a brilliantly accurate rendering of the human body. In both paintings van Haarlem deliberately hides the faces of his protagonists, so that the focus of the work is solely the taut muscular bodies. In *Two Followers of*



Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *Head of a Young Woman (Venus?)*, 1610, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 4)

*Cadmus Devoured by a Dragon*, van Haarlem contrasts the tensed straight leg with the left leg, bent in agony. The second figure, whose torso is visible, leans awkwardly on his crumpled right arm while with his left he tries desperately to keep the ravenous beast at bay. Similarly, in *The Labours of Hercules* the central figure has placed all his weight on his left foot, and the positions of his arms are carefully contrasted. In both works van Haarlem's male nudes are beautifully balanced, in the manner of ancient classical statues.

The male nude is even more of a concern in van Haarlem's drawings, a brilliant example of which is the Hermitage's *After the Deluge* (fig. 3). The drawing came to the Hermitage from the collection of Count Cobenzl (1753-1809), a diplomat who represented the Austrian government in St. Petersburg. Catherine the Great purchased his collection, along with that of his Austrian colleague Charles-Joseph-Emmanuel de Ligne, and these purchases added three paintings by Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and six thousand drawings



Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *The Labours of Hercules* (Detail)

to the Hermitage's collection. This drawing shows the aftermath of the great flood sent by God to purge the world of man's evil. Noah's Ark, however, has been placed in the background atop Mount Arafat, and this subordination of the narrative to the art is comparable to van Haarlem's treatment of Hercules' labours, in the present work. In both works these details serve to contextualise the narrative, but van Haarlem does not allow them to detract from the striking male nude. In *After the Deluge*, the nude is examined from a variety of angles and in a variety of contorted poses. Despite the fact that these corpses have been submerged for months, their bodies are still idealised, with heavily defined musculature. It is noticeable that although some women and children have been depicted, they have not been given the same prominence accorded to the male nude.

In comparison to some of van Haarlem's other works, *The Labours of Hercules* can be considered restrained in mood, and in this it is comparable to another work in the Hermitage, *Head of a Young Woman (Venus?)* (fig. 4). There is a tranquillity to this portrait that allows the viewer to contemplate the young woman's beauty without distraction. Similarly the restrained drama of the present work, with the simple dynamic thrust of Hercules' right arm, allows the viewer to focus wholly on the depiction of the male nude. This mood does not detract in any way from the picture because van Haarlem still depicts a number of different creatures which provide the same diverting detail that is present in works such as *Hercules and Acheloius* and *Two Followers of Cadmus Devoured by a Dragon*. The male nude features so prominently throughout van Haarlem's work that one senses that *The Labours of Hercules* is a truer



Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *The Labours of Hercules* (Detail)

expression of his artistic goals. It is a focused study of the male nude from behind, whilst retaining all the hallmarks of his more frenzied paintings, such as the background vignettes, the wild beasts and the overall monumentality of the image.

Van Haarlem came from a wealthy family and was trained by Pieter Pietersz. (1540/41-1603) and Gillis Congnet (c. 1538-1599). He spent most of his career in Haarlem and became the city's official painter, receiving numerous commissions. Together with his friends Goltzius and Karel van Mander (1548-1606), they established the Haarlem Academy. Influenced by the work of Bartholomäus Spranger (1546-1611) (see inventory), these artists demonstrated a keen interest in the nude, working from live models, marking a point of departure for Dutch art.

Goltzius' etching of the ancient Roman statue *Farnese Hercules*, see figure



Hendrick Goltzius, *Farnese Hercules*, c. 1592, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Figure 5)

5, demonstrates a similar interest in the male nude from behind, that is evident in *The Labours of Hercules*. It seems that van Haarlem's emphasis on the nude may have been one reason why he received many prestigious commissions. As Mariët Westermann writes, 'His grand style would have reminded knowledgeable viewers of the history painting of the Italian Renaissance, specifically of Michelangelo and his followers, and of the praise for idealised nudity and difficult poses in sophisticated art theory'.<sup>4</sup> *The Labours of Hercules* encapsulates the best of van Haarlem's brilliantly rendered and influential style.

We are grateful to Dr. P. J. J. van Thiel for endorsing the attribution to Cornelis van Haarlem on the basis of photographs.

<sup>4</sup> Mariët Westermann, *The Art of the Dutch Republic 1585-1718*, George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd, London, 1996, p. 66.